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By-Warshaw, Thayer S.
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Studying the Bible as a "source book for the humanities" can help students understand Biblical allusions found in literature, the fine arts, the news media, and cultured conversation. Students at Newton High School (Massachusetts) took part in a Biblical study course, using the King James Version because student most commonly meet Biblical quotations in this form. As many of the assigned Biblical passages as possible were linked with literature, music, and art. Quizzes were given on quotations, names, and incidents. In addition to these regular assignments, audiovisual materials--recordings of choral, operatic, spiritual, and popular music, dramatic readings; slides; paintings; and political cartoons--helped relate the Bible to contemporary experience. Because questions on meaning, interpretation, and theological accuracy were scrupulously avoided, no complaints were received from parents or school officials. The students who followed such a course of study expressed enthusiastic support for it, and found it to be of value in daily communication. (LH)

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Studying the Bible in Public School

Thayer S. Warshaw

What does it mean to study the Bible "not as a religious book . . . , but as a source book for the humanities?" Mr. Warshaw gives his answer as he describes work in his classes at Newton, Massachusetts, High School.

Is it possible in public schools to study the Bible, not as a religious book, nor even as a literary work, but as a source book for the humanities? The over-publicized Johnny may follow the adventures of Ulysses by reading the *Odyssey* in school; he may become acquainted with the noble Brutus by reading *Julius Caesar* in school; but he will not find out about King David or Joseph's coat or Paul of Tarsus by reading the Bible in school, simply because the Bible is rarely studied there. Nor will he learn about David, Joseph, and Paul anywhere else, according to the evidence.

One piece of evidence is contained in answers to an unannounced test given to five classes of college-bound eleventh and twelfth graders in a community generally regarded as above average culturally. Several pupils thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers; that the four horsemen appeared on the Acropolis; that the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luther, and John; that Eve was created from an apple; that Jesus was baptized by Moses; that Jezebel was Ahab's donkey; and that the stories by which Jesus taught were called parodies.

The test consisted of 112 rather simple questions selected to discover whether these pupils were familiar with at least the most commonly known Biblical names, stories, and quotations. The results were, to say the least, disappointing. 79% could not supply the last word of the expression "Many are called, but few are *chosen*." 84% could not furnish the last word of the familiar "The truth shall make you *free*." 63% did not know the last word in Isaiah's "They shall beat their swords into *plowshares*." 84% were unable to say that "A soft answer turneth away *wrath*." 88% did not know that "Pride goeth before . . . a *fall*." 74% could not give any reasonable last word for the following statement: "God tested Job by making him_____." And a full 93% could not complete the well-known "The love of money is the root of all *evil*."

This evidence is certainly dismaying, but an experienced high school teacher needs no such test. Let the English teacher begin the study of Nobel prize-winner John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* with an examination of the book's second paragraph, which begins, "If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it. . . ." Nine-tenths of the pupils do not know even what a parable is, much less that in one parable a man "sold all that he had" for "one pearl of great price." Perhaps next time the book is Hemingway's Nobel prize-winning *The Old Man and the Sea*, at the end of which the old man staggers up a hill carrying a heavy mast across his shoulders, stumbles several times, and finally collapses on his bed with his arms outstretched and his hands and forehead showing his recent injuries. Not a soul in the class makes an association until the teacher points to it; and even then most of the pupils take their cue from the quicker ones. Or, finally, let a class in social studies or in English examine Alan Paton's great novel of South African apartheid, *Cry, The Beloved Country*, in which the main character, a religious leader, has a son named Absalom who rebels against him and dies by hanging. Again the pupils can make no association. The teacher wonders what his

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responsibility is—to the child, to the community, to himself, and to the piece of literature.

Should the public schools teach the Bible? In the sectarian clamor over that question, the voice that pleads the case of the humanities cannot be heard. The Bible is indeed a religious book, but it is also a part of our secular cultural heritage. To keep it out of the public schools because it is controversial and because the public cannot trust the good sense of both the teacher and the pupil to treat it as part of the humanities is a simple but questionable judgment. A knowledge of the Bible is essential to the pupil's understanding of allusions in literature, in music, and in the fine arts; in news media, in entertainment, and in cultured conversation. Is he to study mythology and Shakespeare, but not the Bible? Is it important for him to learn what it means when a man is called an Adonis or a Romeo, yet unimportant for him to be able to tell a Jonah from a Judas?

Last year at Newton High School two of my English classes read the Bible. They had read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as usual. They had studied Greek and Norse mythology, as usual. What more appropriate—though more unusual—than to go on to the book that pupils would need far more than either Shakespeare or mythology for an understanding and appreciation of their culture? Such a study was indeed unusual; the Bible has not been in the high school curriculum, even for its great literary passages, in Newton, Massachusetts, for many years.

By reading a few short stories, of which the pupils could make no sense because they could not understand the allusions, they had been made aware of the need for a background in the Bible. They again felt the need when they were unable to interpret some political cartoons I showed them from current newspapers. As a clincher, they both demonstrated and observed their own inadequacy to meet that need, in their humorous but pathetic performance on the pretest described above. The evidence was convincing and they wanted to learn.

At the outset, we came to an understanding on two points. First, we would not discuss meaning or interpretation. The pupils were made to realize that such questions as how to reconcile the two versions of the story of creation in Genesis could not be brought up in class; pupils were to take such questions to religious authorities. Secondly, we would use the King James Version (KJV) solely because that was the form in which the pupils would meet Bible quotations in their reading and in everyday life—as a glance at Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* immediately proved.

Both points were involved when a pupil quoted scholarly authority in questioning the correctness of the KJV at Isaiah 14:12: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer." His Bible at home read, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O day star." Wasn't his translation more accurate? Couldn't he memorize the "correct" one instead?

The answer was obvious: we were not interested in that kind of correctness; we were interested in knowing the words that have influenced our literature. It is just because the KJV uses the name Lucifer in that passage and because Luke 10:18 says, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven," that Lucifer has become another name for the devil in our culture. For every person today who thinks of Lucifer as the Roman god of the morning star there are a hundred who think of Lucifer as the devil. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* Lucifer is one of the fallen angels: "Pandemonium, city and proud seat of Lucifer" (Bk. X, line 424). From Milton, again, "proud as Lucifer" has become part of our stock of familiar expressions. For these reasons the class had to learn the quotation as it appears in the KJV and leave questions of accuracy to theologians.

A similar question arose over whether 1 Corinthians 13:13 was to be memorized as "faith, hope, and charity," as in the KJV, or as "faith, hope, and love," as in later versions. Regardless of the merits of one or the other interpretation, the quotation that the pupils would meet in literature and in conversation would almost invariably be the "faith, hope, and charity" of the KJV. Once again, our interest was in the version that is the source of our familiar quotation; accuracy of translation and appropriateness of meaning were irrelevant.

Class Procedures

Our procedure was simple. Three times a week the pupils had assignments in *The Holy Bible in Brief* (Mentor, 50¢), which contains excerpts from the KJV. Because some favorite Bible stories (Cain and Abel, for example) and commonly used expressions ("Am I my brother's keeper?") are omitted, these regular textbook assignments were supplemented by other passages. Pupils had the choice of looking them up in Bartlett, for quotations, plus any Sunday school book, for stories, or else in the complete KJV.

Also three times a week the pupils had a five-minute quiz to test their knowledge of what they had been assigned: quotations to complete, names to identify, and incidents to remember. These quizzes were corrected, graded, returned, and used for brief instruction sessions. In these sessions I linked as many passages as I could with literature, music, and art. As we went along, the pupils heard about Melville's *Moby-Dick*, with its Ishmael, Ahab, and Elijah; Thomas Mann's *Joseph And His Brothers;* Rossini's *Moses in Egypt;* Mussorgsky's *Josua Navina;* Michaelangelo's *Moses;* Milton's *Samson Agonistes;* Saint-Saëns' *Samson and Delilah;* Honneger's *Le Roi David;* Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!;* Bathsheba in *Hardy's Far From The Madding Crowd;* Gounod's *Queen of Sheba;* Marc Connolly's *Green Pastures;* the popular "Shadrach" and "Jezebel"; Verdi's *Nabucco;* MacLeish's *J. B.;* Massenet's *Herodiade;* and Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. And they learned the origin of such expressions as the patience of Job, a doubting Thomas, a Nimrod, a Judas, a Jonah, a Lazar, an Ananias, and the Adam's apple.

A lighter touch was provided by good-humored reports of anonymous "boner" answers to the regular quizzes: Israel extended from Dan to *dusk*, the Gibeonites were hewers of wood and drawers of *pictures*, sufficient unto the day was the evil *eye*, man could not serve both God and *Merman*, and the word was made *fresh*.

So much for the pupils' day to day acquaintance with the Bible through regular assignments and quizzes. In a few special class periods they had other experiences, through audio-visual materials. One day we had a concert. First, there was the recorded voice of the city's Supervisor of Music singing "Little David Play on Your Harp," as he enthusiastically cooperated in the project. Next, the pupils were able to recognize the voice of Sammy Davis, Jr. singing " 'Tain't Necessarily So," with its "little David was small, but Oh my!" Then, having heard the Negro spiritual and the song from the folk opera, we listened to Judith Anderson's dramatic reading of the story of David and Goliath. That gave us three different forms of expression based on the same Biblical passage. A fourth medium rocked the room as Harry Belafonte shouted the gospel song "Noah." Next, the pupils sat enraptured as Joan Baez complained her folk song about Moses. A sixth genre using the Bible for text was represented by the opening aria of Handel's *Messiah*. During this oratorio passage, as in the case of the Anderson reading, the pupils followed the words in their books.

Two other periods were devoted to viewing slides, one set based on stories

in the Old Testament and one on episodes in the New Testament. Again the emphasis was on variety of forms of expression and excellence of performance, as we covered a span of time from the thirteenth century to last year. There were canvases by Titian, Rubens, Veronese, Tiepolo, Rembrandt, El Greco, Murillo, Brueghel, and Bosch; murals by Michelangelo, Donatello, Verrocchio, and Bernini; reliefs by Brunelleschi and Ghiberti; engravings by Dürer, Doré, and Lucas van Leyden; movie stills of a Hollywood Biblical epic; and a three-in-one package—an Aubrey Beardsley print illustrating Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, a drama that was also the inspiration for Strauss' opera.

These three sessions, showing the Bible in music and the visual arts, constituted most of what was done in class. We devoted no time to interpretation of the text. Instead, we spent the time between the quizzes on the more usual aspects of our course of study: critical reading of poetry (some with Biblical allusion) and the art of effective writing.

Some of the pictures, which the city's Supervisor of Audio-Visual Instruction helped make into slides, and some of the recordings were brought in by pupils. In their enthusiasm they also brought materials from their reading. One student found in his U.S. history textbook an 1884 political cartoon depicting James G. Blaine as Belshazzar at a feast with William Vanderbilt and Jay Gould, complete with the warning handwriting on the wall, but with no word from the author explaining the allusion. Another boy discovered in his U.S. foreign policy textbook a 1932 cartoon opposing cancellation of European war debts, showing a man (Europe) with one pocket bulging with money (for armaments) and one pocket empty and turned out (for war debts). The caption, "Does one pants pocket know what the other is doing?" was an illustration of how a Biblical quotation may come to reverse its meaning. The original, from the sermon on the mount, says, "When thou doest alms, let not they left hand know what thy right hand doeth." In context, it urges self-effacing charity. But today, as in the cartoon, the saying usually implies that it is prudent to distract attention from a bad deed by doing something sympathetic at the same time.

Other political cartoons came from today's newspapers and magazines; and we found humorous cartoons and comic strips with Biblical quotations or allusions, as well as news items about "good Samaritans" who picked up hitchhikers and about praise that should be rendered unto Sid Caesar. All these were made into transparencies that were thrown on the screen in the front of the room—sometimes for discussion, sometimes for a quick laugh, but always as a reminder of the many points at which the pupils come into contact with the Bible in daily life.

What were the results? The 41 pupils in my two eleventh grade classes had scored 22% on that initial test of 112 questions. At the halfway point—upon completion of the Old Testament—and again at the end of the nine-week unit, we had full-period review tests. The test on the Old Testament consisted of 267 questions, of which some pupils got only two or three wrong. The average was 86.5%. Eleven weeks later, one class was given the same test again, without warning. The average performance showed only a 16% loss in recall. For the 310 questions on the New Testament, the average performance was 92.3%; two pupils got them all: Cohen and O'Connell.

Much to our satisfaction and surprise, not one complaint from a parent or other member of the public came to the school principal, the department head, or the teacher. It was surprising if only because ours is a large school that draws from widely differing backgrounds. A teacher

comes to know his pupils fairly well in the course of a school year. I know that there were in my classes devout Catholics; Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews; Protestants of several denominations; and nonbelievers, from the listless to the atheistic. Those parents and clergymen from whom I did hear, either directly or indirectly, were enthusiastic about their children's new knowledge and ability to use it. A few parents good-naturedly protested that they themselves were being forced to study the Bible more intensely than ever before; they had either to defend themselves against the insufferable superiority of their more knowledgeable offspring or to help their children memorize what were becoming all too familiar quotations. Within the school considerable excitement was stimulated. The librarians reported with satisfaction that paperback excerpted Bibles were going fast and that the reference copies of Bibles, Bartlett's *Quotations*, and Biblical encyclopedias were in unusual and intelligent demand. Administrators and fellow faculty members told of Biblical quotations in student conversations. Other teachers expressed interest in using the same materials with their classes—just as, in my classes, I had used materials created by my colleagues.

The greatest source of satisfaction, of course, was the pupils themselves. Nearly every day some pupil made a discovery that he had to share with the teacher or the class. Movie, book, and song titles were especially popular. One boy even brought in some jokes that couldn't be understood without a knowledge of the Bible. He was proud to add a medium of Biblical allusion that the teacher had overlooked.

Results and Reactions

The pupils were given a chance to express themselves on paper. They wrote, in class, on the general topic "Studying the Bible," though they were not limited to a discussion of our course. Some took a look at the question of religion in the public schools, a subject we had never discussed. "I believe there is a difference between teaching and studying the Bible. To me teaching the Bible means looking at it in a religious sense, while studying the Bible means looking at it as a part of literature. I feel that teaching the Bible should not be done in public schools but studying the Bible should." The terms he uses are significant: he feels that he is learning rather than being taught. Another pupil wrote, "Studying the Bible could be most interesting if there weren't so much talk about reading it in schools today. I'm not saying that it isn't interesting, but I think that it would be more so if there weren't all this controversy over the separation of church and state. But by studying the Bible purely for the historical or literary point of view, we have overcome these reasons for not allowing the reading of the Bible." And a third: "Today especially, when the Bible —and whether or not to read it in schools —is seemingly forever in and out of the courts in our country, how can a person form an intelligent opinion if he doesn't even know what is inside the covers? Since the laws of our land are based in part on those in scripture, doesn't it seem reasonable that it would profit a person to study the book (the Bible) that has had such an effect on our country?"

Some told of their religious attitudes and initial reservations to our course on the Bible. "At the start of the course on the Bible I felt that it was not only purposeless to study it as part of literature, but also somehow morally wrong. . . . I no longer feel this way. . . . I am now immediately aware of Biblical reference in books that I have re-read many times without noticing the references." A representative of a different tradition had similar qualms: "My first thoughts of studying the King James Version put great doubt in my mind as to the place of the Bible in school. I received permission to read the Protestant Bible and

really enjoyed my Bible course in school." A member of a third group expressed his introduction to the New Testament thus: "True, in class the principles of 'separation of church and state' and 'keep religion out of the public school' have been strictly adhered to. . . . Yet, in any Biblical study, exposure of the pupil to theological doctrine is in my opinion both inevitable and valuable. . . . Even the most unwilling student, having been thus exposed, would find it extremely difficult not to emerge with some idea of what the word 'Christian' ideologically connotes. I do not condemn this added knowledge; in fact, I greatly value it. I do not consider it necessary to discuss the merits for one living in the midst of a predominantly Christian country to have some understanding of Christianity. . . . Thus this study for me has been two dimensional. It has helped me to feel at home both in and out of the library."

Still others told stories that ranged widely in what they felt they had gained. "My mother is always quoting things she learned from her mother, and I can now answer her with one from the 'other side.' For instance, my sisters were quarreling; and my mother finally got mad when the fight came to blows, and she told the older one to 'turn the other cheek.' Immediately I jumped up and called out, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!' " Said a second "Not only does one seem more intelligent to others when one recognizes a Biblical reference, but it makes one (speaking for myself) feel educated and slightly different from every other junior in high school. It gives me a feeling of superiority and a thrill of pleasure to find that I read and understand more fully." A third tied the subject to a poem she was analyzing: "As Chapman opened the door to Homer for Keats, so the Bible can broaden the meaning of things we read, hear, and see . . . Not only do I find places where the Bible passages are used, but I have opportunities to use some myself in conversation. In many cases my statements have not been effective, mainly because many people do not recognize the allusions. They are missing all that I used to miss."

Should the public school teach the Bible? A teacher wonders what his responsibility is to the student, to the community, to himself, and to the humanities.

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